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Professor Eckerle deciphers "life writings" of sixteenth and seventeenth century women

Summary: Eckerle studies diaries, letters, and even notes jotted in cookbooks to understand the women of the time period and the influence of literature.

(June 16, 2009)—It's not often one has to relearn the most rudimentary skill in their field—reading. That's not exactly what Julie Eckerle, University of Minnesota, Morris assistant professor of English is doing, but it is similar. Eckerle studies the cryptic handwriting of sixteenth and seventeenth century women, those of the early modern period. It's all part of her research for a new book she's writing, *Romancing the Self: A Study of Early Modern Englishwomen's Life Writing*.

According to Eckerle, who earned a doctorate in English from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, the term "autobiography," often associated with people of importance and maturity, is too narrow in scope for her research. She studies "life writing," a broader term that encompasses various autobiographical information including diaries, personal letters, cookbooks, and even notes jotted in the margins of Bibles.

Eckerle posits that writings of early modern women were influenced not only by religion, typical of the period, but also by secular romance stories—think King Arthur and his knights—considered "frivolous reading" at the time. She intends to demonstrate that early modern women portrayed themselves as romantic heroines in their personal writing. But first, in order to do so, she must often decipher the English written word of the time—of which there were no standards. As an example from the period, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar can be found spelled Julius Cæſar, Ivliivs Cæſar, Jvliivs Cæſar, and Iulius Cæſar.

Eckerle is one of thirteen Morris professors who received inaugural University of Minnesota Imagine Fund Awards. Funded in part by a generous grant from the McKnight Foundation, the competitive Universitywide program supports scholarship and artistic endeavors in the arts, design, and humanities. Eckerle's award supports her study of women's "life writing" and research at Chicago's Newberry Library, which houses more than one million books and writings spanning several centuries. She will also conduct research at the Yale University Library in New Haven, Connecticut, and the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.

Beginning her third year at Morris this fall, Eckerle says she chose to teach at the Morris campus because of its small size, its liberal arts emphasis, and its top-of-the-line students. Her research interests in gender often influence the courses she teaches: Shakespeare, Early British Literature, and, of course, Gender and Literature. She is currently collaborating with English major Josh Johnson '10, Stewartville, to create a new course in Non-Shakespearian Renaissance Dramatics.

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